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11 Nov 78

Memorandum for the Director of Central Intelligence

From: Presidential Briefing Coordinator

Subject: MIG Aircraft

1. There have been two fundamental problems in our treatment of this issue.

a. All the people involved have not understood what is at issue and so have not known what is relevant.

b. Specifically various people have used terms like "nuclear capable" in various ways.

If I seem to be insulting your intelligence in the following discussion it is because I am not all that sure I understand what is important.

2. To make sure that I have guided today's work properly, I now outline my understanding of what is at issue.

a. Soviets putting advanced aircraft in Cuba may be interpreted as either:

-- A deliberate move to test US resolve.

-- A move for some other purpose which in any event was not intended to threaten or test the US, but which may be interpreted by some in the US as Soviet duplicity to the jeopardy of the SALT II ratification process.

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b. Therefore we are struggling with finding features of the current situation that can be used to say either:

- These new aircraft do not represent a significant departure from the status quo ante, and then be able to defend that position against critics in the US.
- These new aircraft do represent a departure which increases the threat to the US and so the new situation must be altered in some way.

c. The quality of the aircraft on which we have focused is nuclear weapon delivery capability. Now we must decide:

- Is that concept sufficiently well defined and amenable to monitoring to make it a useful tool?
- If not is there another concept that could be made serviceable?

3. With respect to the use of terms like "nuclear capable" people have used the same words to mean different things. The degree to which a given Soviet aircraft is nuclear capable is fundamentally a question of how long it would take to have it ready to take off carrying a nuclear weapon with a reasonable chance of detonating it on target. The attached paper distinguishes four criteria for nuclear capability; in effect as more criteria are satisfied the aircraft is closer to the time it can take off and deliver a nuclear weapon. In the last month some of us have used "nuclear capable" to mean "basic lift capability," others to mean "special delivery configuration," and others to include all of the above plus "trained personnel."

4. The attached papers go into detail to give you the flavor of what we know and don't know. It also

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